

# The Nijjar Case: A Litmus Test for the Future of India-West Relations?

by Diego Maiorano

Canada's Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, threw a bombshell in Ottawa on 18 September 2023. In a speech before Parliament, he all but accused India of assassinating a Canadian citizen of Indian descent, Harpreet Singh Nijjar, in Vancouver in June 2023. Nijjar was a leader in the Sikh community, the religious minority originating from India's Punjab state. Nijjar advocated for Khalistan, a separate nation for the Sikhs, to be carved out of Punjab. For India, Nijjar was a terrorist, fomenting the separatist cause among the 770,000 Canadian Sikh community – the largest Sikh diaspora in the world.

Trudeau's speech came after the coldness in India–Canada relations had been fully on display at the G20 Summit in New Delhi earlier in September. The Canadian Prime Minister did not meet bilaterally with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's statement of the brief meeting on the sidelines basically accused Ottawa of tolerating "anti-India" activities on its soil by Sikh extremists. As it turned out, Trudeau

had anticipated to Modi the results of Canada's intelligence agencies' investigation of Nijjar's assassination. India rejected the accusations as "absurd"<sup>1</sup> and the two countries quickly escalated the diplomatic crisis by expelling diplomats and issuing travel warnings. India even stopped processing visas for Canadian citizens.

## *A history of violence*

The Khalistan issue has long undermined India–Canada relations, for several reasons. India, as any country, is very sensitive to threats to its national integrity, which have been a constant since it became independent from British rule in 1947, a momentous development which also coincided with Pakistan's bloody secession (from India's point of view) from the

<sup>1</sup> YP Rajesh and Sakshi Dayal, "India Rejects Canada's Suspicions on Role in Sikh Leader's Murder", in *Reuters*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-dismisses-absurd-canadas-accusation-sikh-leaders-murder-2023-09-19>.

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subcontinent. It is no surprise then that India reacted vehemently against the Khalistan independence movement, which descended into civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. The war was no minor event. It included a bloody attack by the Indian army against the Golden Temple in Amritsar (Sikhism's holiest shrine) in June 1984, which left hundreds of armed separatists and pilgrims dead; the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India who had ordered the attack, by her Sikh bodyguards in October the same year; the ensuing Delhi pogroms, in which thousands of Sikhs were lynched; and the death of thousands of other civilians, caught in the crossfire between separatists and the armed forces.

Following the brutal crackdown of the Khalistan movement in India, Sikh extremists found refuge in Canada, which offered shelter. While the movement all but perished in the homeland, it remained alive across the ocean. Sikh extremists were responsible for Canada's bloodiest terrorist attack in 1985, when a bomb blew an Air India flight *en route* from Montreal to London, killing all 329 passengers.

### *The Khalistan issue in Canada – India relations – and beyond*

Two divergent views of freedom of expression have led to repeated clashes between Canada and India. While the former protected the right of Indian-Canadians to promote the Khalistan cause, the latter has accused Canada of tolerating anti-India activities and attacks on its diplomatic corps and Hindu temples.

Canada's recent accusations are, however, a game-changer, especially because they seem to be plausible. It is very unlikely that Trudeau would have made such a direct accusation before Parliament if intelligence had not been thoroughly vetted. Canada is part of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, which includes the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Canada has most likely shared evidence with these partners, thus putting its own credibility on the line. US intelligence agencies had in fact provided information to Ottawa after Nijjar's assassination, which helped Canada to connect the dots and conclude that Indian officials were involved.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the very modality of Nijjar's assassination – gunned down in a parking lot – seems to suggest that whoever organised the operation, did not care too much to cover their tracks. As scholar Avinash Paliwal argued, it seems that New Delhi is sending a clear message to Ottawa: "If you don't act against Khalistan militants, or belittle our security concerns, we'll take action".<sup>3</sup> Notably, in recent months three other Sikh leaders associated with the Khalistan movement died in suspicious circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Two of them were assassinated in Pakistan, which

<sup>2</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Ian Austen, "U.S. Provided Canada with Intelligence on Killing of Sikh Leader", in *The New York Times*, 23 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/23/us/politics/canada-sikh-leader-killing-intelligence.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Avinash Paliwal, "India vs Canada is No More a Bilateral Play", in *Hindustan Times*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/india-vs-canada-is-no-more-a-bilateral-play-101695216633241.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Canada Killing Adds to Suspicions of Indian Crackdown on Sikh Separatists", in *The Guardian*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pva3v>.

accused India of ordering extra-judicial killings on its territory. The third one, who had cancer and whose death is not being investigated by the authorities, passed away recently in the UK, where the local Khalistani movement claimed that he was poisoned.

### *International and domestic repercussions*

The killing of Najjar is bigger than India-Canada relations, as it calls into question the increasingly close relationships between Western countries and India. If Canada's allegations are substantiated, there is a risk that India may be grouped together with authoritarian countries such as Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have all conducted lethal covert operations in G7 countries or their close allies. Western countries would be faced with the dilemma of allowing such a precedent to stand unpunished: a clandestine operation against their own citizens on their own soil by a partner with which they are keen on furthering cooperation in multiple fields, including security.

The US especially will have to walk a fine line in the weeks ahead. This is a very unusual situation for Washington, with a neighbouring, historically important ally like Canada and a key strategic partner like India descending into such a deep and bitter diplomatic spat. The US has apparently started mediating between the two.<sup>5</sup> But the uneasiness of Washington's position is evident from

<sup>5</sup> Nachiket Deuskar, "Why the US Has Been Forced to Walk a Fine Line amidst India-Canada Tension", in *Scroll.in*, 24 September 2023, <https://scroll.in/article/1056409>.

the seemingly contradictory statements by its top officials. For instance, John Kirby, from Biden's National Security Council (NSC), stressed how "vitaly important" US-India relations are. On the other hand, however, the NSC itself has deemed "absolutely unacceptable" the targeting of dissidents in other countries.<sup>6</sup>

Much depends on the cards Canada decides to play. If, for instance, evidence is leaked to the press and such evidence is convincing – as was the case with the Jamal Khashoggi murder, the critic of the Saudi crown prince brutally assassinated by Saudi officials in Turkey – it will be problematic for any Western government to ignore the episode. Even though Canada's allies' reaction has so far been cautious, should the evidence that Ottawa decides to share be solid, India-sceptics within Western diplomacies – and there are many – will have a solid argument to make about putting a brake on the partnership's ambitions.

The Nijjar issue has come to the fore within a backdrop where the limits of the West-India understanding were already put to the test by New Delhi's decision not to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine – actually deepening its trade relationship with Moscow. Moreover, it is clear that India is unlikely to be willing to be dragged into a conflict over the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup> From New Delhi's point of

<sup>6</sup> Peter Baker, "Biden Is Caught between Allies as Canada Accuses India of Assassination", in *The New York Times*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/20/us/politics/biden-canada-india.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India",

view, the relationship with the West is transactional: it is a way to acquire technology and status and an attempt to contain China's rise, without giving much in return. Western countries have so far accepted the deal and given New Delhi ample room for manoeuvre. But the Nijjar episode will force them to ask themselves what price they are comfortable paying for keeping India as the bedrock of their Indo-Pacific strategy.

If the Khashoggi murder is any indication, the US (and its Western allies) might indeed be ready to quickly "forget" (at least publicly) the episode not to jeopardise the increasingly relevant relationship with New Delhi. True, the two episodes are not entirely comparable and have been handled differently by the governments involved. Turkey's President Erdoğan was careful not to explicitly accuse the Saudi government of murder, but rather blamed rogue elements within its security apparatus. Trudeau's public accusations closed that door, making the line the US will have to walk even finer. It is difficult to imagine that the episode will not have any repercussions at all on the way in which Western diplomacies think about their partnership with New Delhi. However, overall, New Delhi may have good reasons to believe that, in the end, the US has invested too much in the Indo-Pacific to let the issue derail its long-term plan for containing China.

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